

ANIMAL REVOLUTION

The Battle of Ideas

The moral basis for animal liberation has been given much attention by modern philosophers since the publication of the well-known novelist Brigid Brophy's major article entitled 'The Rights of Animals' in the *Sunday Times* in 1965. Brophy wrote:

The relationship of homo sapiens to the other animals is one of unremitting exploitation. We employ their work; we eat and wear them. We exploit them to serve our superstitions: whereas we used to sacrifice them to our gods and tear out their entrails in order to foresee the future, we now sacrifice them to science, and experiment on their entrails in the hope – or on the mere offchance – that we might thereby see a little more clearly into the present.⁴

Six years later *Animals, Men and Morals* was published, a book edited by three young Oxford philosophers, Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch and John Harris; Roslind Godlovitch's essay 'Animals and Morals' came out in the same year.⁵ Anti-vivisection letters in the *Daily Telegraph*, the first entitled 'Rights of Non Human Animals', were my own opening shots.⁶ At that time I had no contacts with the then rather stagnant animal welfare movement, nor with the other people in Oxford who were beginning to think along similar lines; for me, it was spontaneous eruption of thought and indignation arising out of the conflict between my natural sympathy for nonhuman animals and what I had witnessed in university laboratories in Cambridge, Edinburgh, New York and California in the 1960s. Brophy, reading my letters in the *Daily Telegraph*, put me in touch with the Godlovitches and John Harris in 1969, and I was able to contribute to *Animals, Men and Morals*. This was reviewed in the *New York Review of Books* in 1973 by Peter Singer, who had known us in Oxford two years earlier.⁷ Andrew Linzey then became part of our circle and so did Stephen Clark; we formed what, retrospectively, can be called an informal Oxford Group. With the support of John Harris, the Godlovitches and others, I organized campaigns against otter-hunting and animal experiments. Years later the Group was superseded by Oxford Animal Rights – a body run by Macdonald Daly of Balliol.



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A spate of serious books on the subject followed, many or most written by members of this group, including my *Victims of Science* in 1975 and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* published in America in the same year and in Britain in 1976.⁸ The Oxford Group's powerful contingent of academic philosophers started a discussion which has continued ever since among their colleagues around the English-speaking world and in Europe. Academic journals such as *Ethics* (January 1978), *Philosophy* (October 1978), *Inquiry* (Summer 1979) and *Etyka* (1980) have published special editions on the moral status of animals. Indeed, animal liberation is possibly unique among liberation movements in the extent to which it has been led and inspired by professional philosophers; rarely has a cause been so rationally argued and so intellectually well armed. Albert Schweitzer had once complained that philosophy had ignored the question, playing 'a piano of which a whole series of keys were considered untouchable'. Yet this modern revolution in thought, which experienced a remarkable surge after the *annus mirabilis* of 1969 (see chapter 11), was heralded by the philosophers themselves.

Our moral argument is that species alone is not a valid criterion for cruel discrimination. Like race or sex, species denotes some physical and other differences but in no way does it nullify the great similarity among all sentients – our capacity for suffering. Where it is wrong to inflict pain upon a human animal it is probably wrong to do so to a nonhuman sentient. The actual killing of a nonhuman animal may also be wrong if it causes suffering or, more contentiously, if it deprives the nonhuman of future pleasures. The logic is very simple.

Geneticists tell us that humankind is physically closer to a chimpanzee than a horse is to a donkey. Surely if animals are related through evolution, then we should all be related morally? The species gap is not an unbridgeable gulf, even physically; some species, such as lions and tigers, can interbreed naturally and produce fertile offspring. Even primate species can do so and, in the laboratory, species can now be mixed like cocktails. One day, if human apes are interbred with other apes, will it be justifiable to hunt or eat or experiment upon the hybrid child, or should he or she be sent to school?

In order to produce cheaper meat, pigs have already been born who contain human genes. Yet surely this makes a nonsense of our speciesist morality? Is it not partial cannibalism to eat such a humanopig? How many human genes are required to make a creature human in the eyes of the law? The Oxford Group has been warning of such genetic developments since the early 1970s.⁹ In the 1980s transspecies fertilization became a reality and in April 1988 the US Administration awarded to Harvard University the first patent for a new animal species – a cancer-prone mouse containing a human gene.¹⁰



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The findings of a scientific RSPCA committee under Lord Medway¹¹ in 1979 to the effect that there now is strong scientific evidence that all vertebrate classes can suffer because all have been found to possess in their bodies those biochemical substances known to mediate pain, supplemented the older biological, neurological and behavioural evidence which pointed in the same direction. Furthermore, we have seen the scientific definition of nonhuman suffering widen to include disease, starvation and mental states such as fear, despair, and those arising from the deprivation of exercise, companionship or stimulation, or from the frustration of other psychological needs.¹²

As if to assert our superior moral status it is sometimes claimed that *Homo Sapiens* is the only altruistic species. But this may not be accurate, for there are authenticated cases of elephants and cetacea trying to assist ailing individuals of their own species, and reports exist of dolphins allegedly trying to help humans. There are also many instances of symbiosis in nature, where one species depends upon another; a predatory fish, for example, allowing cleaner-fish of a different species to cleanse his or her scales in safety. Perhaps our greater toleration of nonhumans may have similar survival value for ourselves, in terms of physical, ecological or even moral benefits. But even if it were true that humans are the only unselfish species, how could this justify our exploitation of other sentients? Should it not reinforce our sense of duty towards them?

The answer to the question 'But isn't it *natural* to be speciesist?' is that it may *not* be, and that even if it is, speciesism and selfishness are still wrong; rape and murder, after all, can spring from 'natural' impulses, but this consideration does not transform rape or murder into virtuous behaviour. We are not slaves to our genes; genetic tendencies can, to a large extent, be overcome through education and by the restraints of civilization.

Other excuses have been used by humans to justify our speciesism, for example, that we are the only tool-using or tool-making species, or that we are the only animal capable of language. In recent decades, all such distinctions have been eroded by science. Other apes, in particular, have been found to be tool-makers capable of learning human sign-language.

One is left in the startlingly simple position, already stated, that whatever is morally wrong in the human case is probably wrong in the nonhuman case as well. When faced with a particular type of exploitation one can apply some such 'human test'. *Veal calves*: would it be right to separate babies from their mothers while still suckling? *Laboratory rats*: would it be right to inflict severe electric shocks upon unwilling men and women? *Bullocks*: would it be right to castrate boys and fatten them to be eaten? *Foxes*: would it be right to chase vagrants across the countryside and to encourage hounds to tear them apart?

The implications of such a revolutionary conclusion are inconvenient, yet they remain entirely rational. What holds for humans, especially for such categories as the mentally handicapped and infants, should also apply in the case of nonhumans.

